

Schools tackle technology

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Osborne

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University officials from around the region puzzled Thursday over why they are not mining more nuggets of innovation from their scientists' laboratories.

It's a troubling situation, considering how much Kansas, Missouri and other states depend on universities for technology that can produce new companies, new products and good-paying jobs, said Lesa Mitchell, a vice president at the **Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation** in Kansas City.

"We are in a knowledge economy," Mitchell said at the Big 12 Innovation and Capital Formation Conference conducted at the foundation Thursday. "The university is a critical player in the economy."

Scientists, technology transfer specialists, investors and others from the seven states that are home to universities in the Big 12 athletic conference gathered at the event to share tips, showcase their best researchers and technologies and explore working together more closely. The event was held in conjunction with the Kauffman foundation's Entrepreneurship Week USA.

"From Lubbock to Ames, from Boulder to Columbia, we have some opportunities to reduce the complexities of lab-to-market innovation," said Ron Kessler, an Austin, Texas, lawyer who is one of the leaders of the high-tech economic development initiative intended to link Big 12 universities.

Many of the universities face similar challenges.

With some exceptions, venture capital or other investment dollars are not plentiful, the schools lack illustrious histories filled with blockbuster commercial successes, and the ties between industry and researchers and technology managers could be stronger.

Tom Osborne, the former Nebraska congressman and football coach, is leading an effort to address the need for more money to fuel development of promising early-stage technology.

He has conducted initial talks with investors in the region whose wealth is measured "in the billions" or "hundreds of millions" of dollars, Osborne said in an interview. He declined to name any of those who have been approached so far.

The idea, he said, is eventually to bring these investors possible deals that match their particular interests or expertise. Their financial support could provide the needed catalyst to help the region's promising startups gain traction.

Another part of the initiative would help match scientists with peers pursuing similar research at other universities.

Factors similar to those that brought the 12 universities together for athletics apply to technology development, Osborne said.

Football teams in the states of the old Big 8 conference, he said, lacked the heft to generate big television contracts from the networks. The addition of schools in Texas, though, made a big difference.

Pooling the region's best technology and winning the endorsement of prominent area investors could play a similar role in attracting attention from venture capitalists who typically focus more on the coasts, Osborne said.

While the hubs that are home to **Stanford University** and the **Massachusetts Institute of Technology** tend to command a lion's share of investment dollars, other regions also can succeed, said Baiju Shah, president of a Cleveland initiative called **BioEnterprise**.

A system of reaching out to venture capitalists and then grooming young companies that match the investors' interests has succeeded in boosting annual health-care venture investments in the Cleveland region from about \$30 million to more than \$100 million, Shah said.

"If we can convert a rust belt into a tech belt, it certainly can happen in the Great Plains," Shah said.